

Tshering's visit, this time, to her home village in Dolakha district was unlike her normal trips. This 26-year old woman was not travelling to meet family, she was there to educate her village people, mostly of the Sherpa ethnic group, about HIV/AIDS prevention and to establish new condom selling links.

"Because I am a local and a Sherpa, people respond well to me and I think I can convince people to sell condoms," Tshering says confidently.



The fact that Devraj Neupane, a photo studio owner, and Yadav Silwal, a fruits vendor agreed to sell condoms substantiates her certainty. "I told them that in the absence of pharmacy outlets in our region, they had a responsibility and opportunity to serve their community," Tshering recounted.

In addition to increasing the availability of condoms, she is educating locals about the risk of HIV/AIDS. "People have heard about HIV/AIDS but they didn't know that condoms could prevent HIV," she explains. With each outlet, Tshering discusses the importance of using condoms and asks store owners to educate their customers as well.

Tshering joined the Nepal Contraceptive Retail Sales (CRS) company, supported by USAID's Nepal Social Marketing and Franchise Project (N-MARC), after finishing her A levels in Forestry in March 2008. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in Sociology through a distant learning course. To improve her marketing skills, she recently underwent a five-month training course in Kathmandu, the impact of which is clear: in 2008, she convinced over 50 non-traditional outlets (NTOs) to sell condoms.

USAID's program marks a paradigm shift in HIV/AIDS social marketing practices to focus on

remote mountain areas by hiring staff like Tshering as field representatives. She works in the Lukla area and follows the trekking trail to the Everest Base Camp via Namche Bazaar, the gateway to Mount Everest. While she continues to educate people on the benefits of using condoms, Tshering is also focusing on opening NTOs, as many villages in her region do not have access to conventional medical outlets.

Tshering's cultural connection to the region proves valuable in gaining the trust of these far-off rural communities. Based upon Tshering's early success, CRS has plans to expand this mountain-focused marketing approach to other remote areas such as Dolpa, Jumla, and Humla – some of the most isolated districts of the country.

"At times, my job is difficult because people are not used to women selling condoms, but everyday I am getting more comfortable in what I do. My plan for 2009 is to be able to expand to around 100 NTOs and re-stock the existing ones," says Tsering with confidence and ease.